

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER

Independence Fiber Optic Backbone Lighting Event

Independence, Virginia

May 15, 2006

I am pleased to visit Grayson County this afternoon to participate in a truly worthy celebration. Today, we officially light the fiber-optic backbone in the Town of Independence, a project which will provide broadband services, including affordable high-speed Internet access, to businesses and residents of Independence. The success we celebrate today is the first significant step in bringing broadband telecommunication services to Grayson County.

The economic success of rural communities has long been determined by access to major arteries of commerce. In earlier eras, proximity to canals, then railroads, and then major interstate highways determined the potential for economic development in a community. In the 21st Century, broadband is the major artery of commerce, and access to broadband services is critical for an economically successful community.

Ten years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation for the purpose of attracting industries seeking locations for expansion, attracting new companies with technology-based jobs, and aiding locally-owned small businesses in expanding operations.

Today, many Ninth District communities are making great strides in the deployment of broadband networks, and the success which we celebrate today in Grayson County is a shining

example of the outstanding work that is being done in many of our localities.

The total cost of Grayson County's new fiber-optic backbone is \$383,472, which has been provided by several federal, state and local sources. The Appalachian Regional Commission, at my urging, granted the Town of Independence \$138,472 in federal funds for the project. The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development also provided funds in the amount of \$80,000, and the Virginia Tobacco Commission granted the Town \$100,000 for the project. Locally, these funds were matched by a provision of funding from Town of Independence and the Town's Industrial Development Authority in the amount \$45,000 and from Grayson County in the amount of \$20,000.

To create the fiber-optic backbone, over 4.3 miles of conduit, containing multiple 5 millimeter tubes which hold fiber optic cable, has been installed in Downtown Independence. The new backbone is located along Main Street, Route 21, and Davis Street extending to the Industrial Park. Pedestals have been placed along the backbone to provide access to the fiber, and single strands of fiber can be extended to new connections through the conduit.

More than 50 connections have already been established to this network, and in the near future, more businesses and homes will be linked to the backbone. This fiber will make broadband services available to public buildings such as the Independence Town Hall, schools within the Town, the Grayson County Sheriff's office, the Grayson County Public Library, the 1908 Courthouse, and the Grayson County Courthouse where we are gathered today. Business locations such as the Grayson National Bank and the Guynn Shopping Center will also receive service.

Before work began on this project, residents and businesses within the Town of Independence had access to the Internet only through slower dial-up service. Officials from the Town of Independence and Grayson County decided to pursue the installation of a state-of-the-art fiber-optic backbone which not only would provide high-speed Internet access and other broadband services but also would enable the expansion of the network to include a larger part of Grayson County in the future.

Today's celebration marks the completion of the first step in providing broadband services to Grayson County residents. Now that the fiber optic backbone is in place, plans are underway to extend broadband services wirelessly to serve a larger portion of the Town of Independence and Grayson County.

New, cutting edge wireless technologies hold great promise for our region. I have recently hosted workshops to provide information about these technologies, which have the potential of providing more affordable broadband connections for citizens and businesses in rural areas such as Grayson County. These workshops were well attended, and I would mention that Independence Town Manager Kenny Vaught, Ralph Tuggle, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, Mike Maynard, who also serves on the Board, Bill Ring, County Administrator, and officials with the Town of Fries were among those who participated.

We are all in agreement that Grayson County would serve as an excellent location to showcase new wireless technology. For this reason, I have joined with Ralph Tuggle and other members of the Board of Supervisors to launch an Economic Development Task Force made up of local officials, business owners and residents. One goal with which this group is charged is assessing the current telecommunications capabilities within Grayson County and developing a plan for extending broadband services from Galax and Independence into other areas of the County. This task force held its first meeting on May 4 and will conclude its work this August with the presentation of its findings to the Board of Supervisors.

The fiber-optic backbone we officially light today is only the first significant step in bringing broadband to all Grayson County residents. Just as in earlier eras canals, railroads and highways made it possible to transport cargo to commercial centers, Grayson County's new fiber-optic backbone will make it possible to transport data at light speed to any location worldwide. Step by step, our region's expanding fiber-optic infrastructure is assuring that Southwest Virginia's communities will be at the center of economic opportunity.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a number of individuals who have been instrumental in the success we celebrate today.

I want to commend Butch Reeves, Mayor of Independence, the Independence Town Council and the Independence Industrial Development Authority for their leadership and foresight in developing this state-of-the-art infrastructure.

I also want to recognize Ralph Tuggle, Chairman of the Grayson County Board of Supervisors, the other members of the Board and Bill Ring, County Administrator, for their commitment to bringing this vital new service to Grayson County.

I would also like to thank the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission and its Executive Director, Dave Barrett, as well as this project's manager, Brian Reed, for their commitment to making this project a reality.

Senator William Wampler and other members of the Virginia Tobacco Commission are to be thanked for their significant financial contributions to not only the deployment of fiber-optic backbone but also to connecting businesses and residents to the backbone over the last mile.

I would like to thank Bill Shelton, the Executive Director of the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, and the excellent staff of the Department for their support of this project.

Finally, I want to thank my District Director, Laura Lee, for her persistent and persuasive work in aid of this project.

The fiber-optic backbone which we officially light today marks another major step forward in our work to improve the quality of life for Southwest Virginia residents. I want to commend all here for the success of this project and offer special congratulations to the residents and business owners of Independence who will benefit tremendously from the new broadband telecommunications services that are now available to them.